

READING THE WORLD THROUGH SOMATIC
ENCOUNTERS WITH THE UNIVERSE IN MICHEL
SERRES'S PHILOSOPHY AND SYLVAIN TESSON'S *PETIT
TRAITÉ SUR L'IMMENSITÉ DU MONDE*

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Building upon Michel Serres's transdisciplinary, sensualist outlook on life, this article proposes a Serresian interpretation of the contemporary travel writer and nomadic explorer Sylvain Tesson's critically acclaimed essay *Petit traité sur l'immensité du monde*. Specifically, this exploration focuses on Serres and Tesson's attempts to rehabilitate our much-maligned five senses by demonstrating that our sensorial faculties are vital epistemological and spiritual vectors that enable us to comprehend the biosphere and our small place in it more fully. In stark contrast to dominant puritanical ideology, which cautions us to be "wary of the flesh" because the "flesh is weak," Serres and Tesson implore the alienated postmodern subject to (re)establish a direct, sensorial connection to the universe in an age epitomized by ecological deterritorialization and an environmental crisis that threatens the existence of all sentient organisms including *Homo sapiens*. This insatiable zeal to taste, touch, see, smell, and hear everything that life has to afford during our ephemeral time on this earth is the heart of an ontological and spiritual quest that endeavours to shed light on *who* and *what* we are in relation to the greater cosmic whole from whence we came. Serres and Tesson compellingly posit that "the somatic encounter of the living body in relation to itself and its environment" is laden with philosophical and spiritual value (Johnsen 68). They promulgate a new way of living and being in the world with our "Cul sur la selle, pensées au ciel"¹ (Tesson, *Petit traité* 75) that removes us, at least temporarily, from our "padded cells" (Chare 100) in which we spend nearly every waking moment

in our edifices of brick, wood, concrete, or steel. When we reconnect ourselves to the universe by revitalizing our dulled senses, which entails a removal of the physical and digital barriers standing in the way of experiencing the splendour of the cosmos to which we are directly and inextricably linked, Serres and Tesson maintain that a more biocentric “lecture du monde”² (Tesson, *Petit traité* 79) emerges that is paramount to restoring our lost sense of ecological awareness preventing us from taking action in defence of an imperilled planet on the brink of collapse.

BRIEF CONTEXTUALIZATION OF *PETIT TRAITÉ SUR L'IMMENSITÉ DU MONDE*

356 It is, perhaps, in his essay *Petit traité sur l'immensité du monde* (2005) that Tesson most clearly articulates his ecocentric, sensualist *Weltanschauung* and deep-seated anxiety related to anthropogenic climate change. Although many themes appear in this lyrical work, such as the inauthenticity of the postmodern lifestyle, the pervasive disconnect between humanity and the remainder of the cosmos, the perils of excessive urbanization, the nefarious effects of globalization, and the lingering influence of patriarchal oppression around the world, “Tesson’s approach is [always] fundamentally anchored in ecological thought and the defense of the environment” (Blum-Reid 40; my insertion). Tesson reveals that his physically gruelling expeditions to some of the most remote places on the planet, where he “has toured the world by bicycle, crossed the Himalayas on foot, followed the route of Gulag escapees walking from Siberia to Calcutta” (Blum-Reid 40) are fuelled by a desire to “établir un rapport plus direct avec la nature”³ (“Petit traité sur l’immensité du monde” n.p.) through his senses. In the same vein as “moine-mendiants, troubadours, voyageurs, *hobos* ou beatniks”⁴ (Tesson, *Petit traité* 15; emphasis in original), Tesson is a quintessential nomad who incessantly flees the postmodern world in search of a more authentic relationship with the rest of the biosphere. He also engages in self-critique all throughout the essay; in numerous passages, he laments that he has sometimes “trahi les principes du *fair means*”⁵ (*Petit traité* 23; emphasis in original). Tesson’s concept of “fair means” refers to a kind of slow travel that reinvigorates our numbed senses in addition to offering ample time for reflection. He theorizes that modern forms of transportation such as airplanes, helicopters, cars, and trains place our bodies into a passive position that is not conducive to contemplation. Moreover, he contends that “vagabondage motorisé”⁶ (Tesson, *Petit traité* 24) is problematic, because our senses working in tandem with our brain as one integrated entity do not have enough time to process the information that we receive properly. Tesson’s theory that discovering the world through “fair means,” such as walking, running, or cycling, allows us to catch a glimpse of the vastness of the universe and to reattune our senses is not only the key concept that links the aforementioned themes together in *Petit traité sur*

l'immensité du monde, but it also helps the reader to understand the philosophical ethos behind the writer's compulsive need to explore the farthest reaches of the globe. Reading this essay makes it clear why a devastating fall during a rock climbing trip that landed Tesson in the hospital for approximately five months in a coma did not alter his nomadic, sensorial approach to life whatsoever.

REESTABLISHING A DIRECT, SENSORIAL CONNECTION TO THE BIOSPHERE

Even if the maverick thinker Michel Serres does not share Tesson's passion for extreme outdoor adventures, such as free solo climbing without ropes or any other safety precautions, the epistemologist and philosopher of science equally valorizes sensorial encounters as a pathway of knowledge. Compared to much of traditional Western thought, which suggests that the senses play negligible role in the process of knowledge acquisition, Serres's philosophy appeals to "[r]eaders who know (or at least remember) what it's like to use their bodies in encountering the world" (Paulson 218). Serres tries to initiate a "sensual journey" in the literary-philosophical space that paradoxically compels us to go beyond the text and to dive as deeply as possible into the "world of things" (Tucker 158). Criticizing mainstream philosophical paradigms that are too abstract and severed from the ecological realities that concretize what it means for a sentient being to live and die in a universe into which we were arbitrarily tossed by indiscriminate forces billions of years ago starting with a big bang, Serres proclaims in *L'Interférence*, "Il n'existe pas, pour le moment du moins, une philosophie de ce monde pour ce monde"⁷ (69). Seventeen years later, in his aptly named *Les cinq sens*, a seminal essay that would position him as one of the pioneers in the field of Sensory Studies (Chare 99), Serres reiterates, "la philosophie oublie la maison qu'elle habite [...] cette maison de sensation [...] et si la philosophie nous venait des sens"⁸ (157; 211).

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Instead of separating us from the biosphere, or worse, pretending that we are somehow different from other random byproducts of evolution, Serres adopts another approach to engaging in philosophical inquiry with the ultimate goal of reconnecting our bodies to the world. His question in *Les cinq sens*, "Peaux sans portes ni fenêtres, cottes de mailles, blindage, que sentez-vous ?"⁹ (74) should be understood in this context. Inspired by a contemplative stroll during which he was able to eliminate the obstacles between him and the cosmos, Serres ponders, "En rebroussant chemin sur ce sentier pentu, j'évoque le rêve, poétique encore, d'une autre épistémologie. Puis-je reconstruire la connaissance à partir de cette entente ? Comment l'oreille connaît-elle ? Et comment connaît notre peau, vibrant des autres et du Monde, elle aussi"¹⁰ (*Musique* 89). For Serres, there is nothing gratuitous about the sensorial pleasure that he derives from communing with the natural world. This elemental euphoria triggered by keen senses in direct contact with other forms of matter¹¹ fosters a greater

understanding of the universe and our relationship to it. Elucidating that it is harder than ever to open up these epistemological channels owing to the postmodern way of life linked to the rural exodus, Serres speaks directly to the reader: “viens, le dernier des enfants des hommes à pouvoir entendre et voir, viens sentir et toucher, tu apprendras bien assez tôt la science [du savoir], assuré que tu l’apprendras”¹² (*Les cinq sens* 112; my insertion). According to Serres, “nous perdons les sens”¹³ (*Les cinq sens* 231) because of the radical social transformations ushered in by “rapid urbanization and various forms of ingenuity that no longer require us to use certain body parts like our human ancestors” (Moser 146).

358 Serres’s interrelated theories of exo-Darwinian evolution and hominization (or *hominescence*) emphasize the significance of the sweeping changes throughout the course of human history that have created a sharp ontological gap between contemporary *Homo sapiens* and our ancestors. Serres insists that we are witnessing the birth of a new type of humanity or human condition that only vaguely resembles the lived experiences of our predecessors. He is astutely aware of the positive ramifications of this evolutionary transformation in the shape of longer lifespans and a drastic reduction in human suffering connected to the advent of modern medicine, to the point of being ridiculed by his detractors, such as Julien Gautier, for creating too rosy a picture in works like *Petite Poucette* and *Le Gaucher Boiteux*. However, he also underscores the negative impact of the inventions that have fundamentally altered what it means to be human. Offering an operational definition of his concept of exo-Darwinian evolution, Serres affirms, “Nos organes se vident quelquefois de leurs formes et fonctions pour les verser à l’extérieur [...] Ces appareils externalisés produisent [...] une histoire que j’appelle évolution exo-darwinienne”¹⁴ (*Variations sur le corps* 105-107). When we conceive a tool that replaces how the body itself used to perform a specific task, Serres hypothesizes that our sensory organs no longer have the same sort of direct contact with the earth that he maintains is pivotal from an epistemological and spiritual standpoint.

As Serres muses in the opening pages of *Variations sur le corps*, an essay that further refines his sensualist worldview:

Je marche sur un sol dont la pente se relève doucement. A un moment, je m’arrête et ‘mets les mains’; la vraie montagne commence, j’escalade. Dès lors que mon dos s’incline, reviens-je à l’état de quadrupède ? Presque : mon corps se transforme [...] je me souviens de qui nous fûmes [...] Comment avons-nous pu oublier ce rapport élémentaire et animal au monde.¹⁵ (1-3)

Serres’s nuanced vision of human innovation recognizes how certain inventions and discoveries have drastically improved the quality of our lives. Nonetheless, he argues that the tools through which we manipulate and interact with the world, especially in the age of information, have deadened our senses in addition to hollowing out our appreciation and comprehension of the biosphere. In *Hominescence*, he links his notion of exo-Darwinian evolution to the idea of hominization:

Bref, dans les décennies récentes, naquit, ici, un corps nouveau. Plus qu'historique, cette coupure touche à l'anthropologie, à l'évolution de l'*hominien*, au processus global d'*hominisation* [...] Le corps nouveau recompose, en effet, l'esthétique, la morale et la politique, la violence et la cognition, plus encore, l'*être-au-monde*.¹⁶ (*Hominescence* 46-47; emphasis mine)

For Serres, there is no substitute for “direct human experience” (*The Troubadour of Knowledge* 94); *hominescent* postmodern humanity must make a concerted effort to restore their senses “through which we feel, touch, taste, and see the world” to their primordial vitality by reestablishing a direct link to the natural world to which our species belongs (Tucker 150).

Tesson's theory of “fair means” represents a concrete attempt to put these principles into action. In reference to the travel writer and kindred spirit Robert Louis Stevenson, Tesson declares, “Les embruns du voyage lui vivifient l'âme et lui revigorent le corps”¹⁷ (*Petit traité* 40). This intertextual homage reflects Tesson's conviction that somatic encounters with the universe permit hominescent humans to “redevient un peu un mammifère”¹⁸ (qtd. in Porte 69). Not only does Tesson propose the same remedy as Serres for healing the disconnect that has anaesthetized our senses in the form of a “réapprentissage du corps”¹⁹ and “un rapport physique avec le monde”²⁰ (Ridon 24) but he also goes from theory to practice during his previously mentioned adventures. In this regard, *Petit traité sur l'immensité du monde* could be described as an effort to probe the philosophical underpinnings of his nomadic instincts and inability to remain in a stationary position. Tesson strives to recover what the human animal has lost throughout the course of its evolution. He expresses a marked predilection for remote spaces that do not bear a heavy human footprint, because he contends that this is where we are “invited” to rediscover the awe-inspiring wonder of the cosmos and our inherent animality that binds us to it.

Beckoning the reader to answer this call, or to open the proverbial door, Tesson asserts:

Dans la forêt du dernier recours, en revanche, on rentre avec sa cognée autant qu'avec ses livres sans s'isoler du chant de la nature, sans couper les racines qui relient notre chair à l'humus du monde. Sans renoncer à l'animalité qui est la grandeur de l'homme.²¹ (*Petit traité* 153)

When we travel by “fair means” off the beaten path, we remember “what it means to put one foot in front of the other and propel the body (and the mind) forward” in the age of exo-Darwinian evolution (Blatt 56). The sensual journey that Tesson advocates is like a window to ourselves that opens up into philosophical and spiritual dimensions. We rediscover ourselves as mammals, primates, and sensuous beings in general for whom the senses play a major role in the formation of knowledge. Tesson stresses “the necessity of humans to reconnect to their intrinsic animal nature” (Koo 4) as he “calls forth and attunes his body to perceiving the land as an animal or a tree would” (Calvete 482). The “physical exertion” (Calvete 488) that Tesson describes in *Petit traité sur l'immensité du monde* is part of an attempt to “fine-tune” (Calvete 480)

his senses and to tap into our animal essence. Tesson continually pushes himself to the brink, due to his desire to “reconnect with the roots that bind humans to planet earth” (Koo 15).

360 Although the chronic state of corporeal exhaustion that he depicts would certainly not appeal to many readers, Tesson’s main message concerning the rehabilitation of our senses resonates. Furthermore, his self-deprecating description of himself as someone endowed with a “corps [qui] semble jamais vouloir se reposer [qui ...] se conduit comme un enfant rassasié dont il faudrait s’occuper sans cesse”²² (*Petit traité* 27; my insertions) softens the tone of his sometimes-scathing critiques of the sedentary, postmodern lifestyle. Rejecting “les séjours sédentaires et paresseux dans les villes”²³ (*Petit traité* 63), Tesson confesses, “J’aime voyager fébrilement, les sens aux aguets, aiguisés pour ne pas rater la moindre parcelle du spectacle qui défile”²⁴ (*Petit traité* 62). Even if the “somatic encounter with a turbulent, physical world” (Paulson 24) may be dangerous at times, Tesson insists that this unfiltered contact with the universe is how we can reawaken our dormant senses in the *hominescent* era. Similar to Serres, Tesson’s “perception of [the world] is kinaesthetic” (Calvete 488; my insertion) and inseparable from the innate corporality that grounds our very being.

In keeping with the basic tenets of his doctrine of “fair means” travel, walking is Tesson’s preferred way to hone his senses and to uncover the beauty of the biosphere. As Halia Koo notes, “Tesson stresses the importance of humans embracing their animal nature and standing on their own two feet” (3). Koo further explains that “[w]alking becomes a favored way for modern travelers to reclaim their physical connection to the world, the natural environment and the ecosystem” (5). With “les pieds couverts de sangsues, égaré dans les boues d’un marécage”²⁵ (*Petit traité* 20), Tesson takes “petits pas”²⁶ (*Petit traité* 21) in response to the blistering pace of the postmodern situation that leaves little room for reflection. According to Tesson, the antidote for reversing the adverse consequences of what the philosopher-farmer Pierre Rabhi terms speeditis is slow travel through “fair means,” which can temporarily “freine[r] la course des heures”²⁷ (*Petit traité* 18), thereby thrusting our bodies and minds back into meaningful contact with the biosphere.

SOMATIC ENCOUNTERS AS AN EXISTENTIAL AND SPIRITUAL QUEST

This intimate, sensorial connection to the earth leads to existential and spiritual epiphanies for both Serres and Tesson. Given that “you cannot think without a body, body and mind are bound in a continual and inseparable process that shapes our experience” (Deligiannis 168), Serres and Tesson present a “forceful case for the role of the body” (Stuart 46) on an epistemological level. When “nous restons sur terre, les deux pieds [...] sur terre”²⁸ (Serres, *Les cinq sens* 59) we are able to dismiss outdated anthropocentric logic that runs counter to contemporary scientific erudition.

Our “outmoded view of reality” (Johnsen 39), which creates an unfounded ontological schism between *Homo sapiens* and other animals that is not supported by even a rudimentary understanding of ecological laws that can be observed firsthand through our senses, gives way to a more biocentric and objective reading of the world. To be more precise, anthropocentric delusions of grandeur, including the notion of human exceptionalism, fall part entirely after our relationship to the cosmos has been reestablished. Instead of placing our species on an existential pedestal as a member of an allegedly superior race, we are able to recognize the human animal as but one thread in the larger tapestry of life. The “magic of [somatic] relations” (O’Keeffe 28; my insertion) that both Serres and Tesson portray fosters a deep sense of cosmic humility and a heightened state of ecological self-actualization. As Steven Connor underscores, “For Serres, it is via humility [that] the human subject comes into being” (5; my insertion). Illustrating that humans have the same intrinsic right to exist as any other organism in a chaotic, deterministic universe, Serres wonders:

Mais qui suis-je, moi qui vois ? Et ces vivants, plantes ou animaux, champignons et algues, monocellulaires qui m’habitent et que je ne vois pas ? Des fontaines de temps, ruisselantes parmi d’autres [...] Je ne compte, quant à moi, que comme une autre marche de l’escalier.²⁹ (*L’Incandescent* 17)

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Numerous critics, such as Steven Connor, Ian Tucker, Hanjo Berressem, Maria Assad, and David Webb, have observed that the decentered feelings of cosmic humility espoused by Serres are a reflection of a “purely materialistic point of view” (Assad 219) emphasizing the “primary materiality of the human condition” (Tucker 150). Serres plunges himself deep into “la nature intime de la vie, de la matière”³⁰ (*Hermès IV: La Distribution* 10) through somatic encounters in an effort to commune with other modalities of matter that have momentarily assumed a given ontological shape before these material particles are recycled to generate new life. In a passage from *L’Incandescent* that is a thinly-veiled explanation of the doctrine of philosophical materialism, Serres affirms, “Mais aussi haut qu’il se monte du col, tout Cervin sait bien qu’il contient la même poussière que la taupinière. Nous sortons tous de la même terre, de la même mère, de la même universelle matière”³¹ (203). He exposes lingering anthropocentric concepts, which we have partly inherited from Renaissance Humanism, monotheistic ideology, and the Enlightenment, including the human-nature dichotomy as forms of chimerical, wishful thinking that create ontological hierarchies that do not hold up to empirical scrutiny at all. Serres’s deconstruction of this “false transcendence” (Johnsen 39); from material realities predicated upon faulty anthropocentric logic demonstrates that “Qu’on le veuille ou non, c’est la matière qui commande : le meilleur gouvernement du monde ne peut donner que ce qu’elle a. Il arrive qu’elle ne recèle pas de poche à eau. Et que tarde la saison des pluies”³² (Serres, *Hermès III: La traduction* 257). When we (re)attune ourselves to the cosmos through a retraining of our disconnected bodies that revitalizes the sensory organs enabling us to make sense of the world, we reach the Serresian conclusion

that there is nothing *exceptional* about *Homo sapiens* from an ecological perspective.

Tesson's reckless, extreme adventures in direct contact with elemental matter trigger strikingly similar biocentric revelations that enable him to "dissociate himself from an anthropocentric vision of the world and be more ecologically aware" (Koo 1). The physical hardships of Tesson's "intellectual journey" actuate a "deeper and more primordial meaning of existence" (Koo 17). As Tesson himself reveals in an interview, "Je vais enfin savoir si j'ai une vie intérieure"³³ (qtd. in Ridon 20). These epitextual comments shed light on Tesson's addiction to travelling by "fair means." No matter how arduous the path, or even potentially mortal, he obstinately keeps his feet moving, since he never knows what he will learn about himself or the universe at the outset. When Tesson begins another expedition, there is no predetermined goal; he compulsively moves from one adventure to the next, because he is trying to "redonner un sens"³⁴ (Ridon 21) to his existence. When Tesson "turns to the natural landscape for [epistemological] coherence" (Calvete 486; my insertion), it facilitates

362 a way of knowing that allows him to transcend the limitations of anthropocentric, Western thought.

Tesson's critiques of humanism, as it has traditionally been conceived, in Chapter Eight of *Petit traité sur l'immensité du monde* mirror the cosmic humility that Serres promulgates. The greatest lesson that Tesson internalizes from his sensorial fugues, during which he turns his back on the postmodern world, is that life has no centre from which it emanates. Scoffing at any philosophical model revolving around the illusory idea of human supremacy and exceptionalism, Tesson opines:

On m'avait enseigné que l'Homme occupait le sommet de la pyramide du Vivant. Mais l'édifice s'est écroulé et je me méfie à présent de lui comme d'une eau claire que les yeux croient bonne et que le gosier découvre salée. J'ai déboulonné l'Homme de mon piédestal intérieur comme on jetait Lénine au bas des socles de marbre dans les Républiques socialistes à l'automne 91.³⁵ (*Petit traité* 91-92)

Even if our species finds itself at or near the top of the food chain, Tesson points out that our fleeting existence is still governed by the same universal, harsh, and unbending ecological laws that sustain all life forms. Whether we like it or not, we are part and parcel of the earth, just like any other creature. Halia Koo cogently highlights "Tesson's approach [that] stands out by its fierce anti-humanism" (14; my insertion), but it could also be argued that the writer embraces a different sort of biocentric humanism that does not privilege *Homo sapiens* and which extends throughout the biosphere to other organisms.

Serres's and Tesson's reworkings of humanism are also connected to another conception of the Divine linked to the inner workings of the cosmos. Although they are not religious in the strict sense of the term, their rehabilitation of the senses has evident spiritual connotations; as Brian O'Keeffe outlines, "Leave aside God, says Serres, but retain the adjective divine [...] his feelings of relation push him toward what he describes as a certain pantheism" (28). Serres directly addresses his pantheistic sensibilities in *Le Parasite* and *La Légende des anges*: his view of the Divine

pinpoints “Pan” as the “mère de toutes choses”³⁶ (Serres, *Le parasite* 25). Additionally, his affirmation “Or si Dieu existe, il est la vie, le vent, le feu [...] l’essence de la vie [...] le commencement [...] l’excellence et l’amour de la vie”³⁷ (*La Légende des anges* 187) helps us to understand the ecstasy initiated through somatic encounters in Serres’s philosophy. During intense moments of elation in contact with other material entities, the Serresian narrator endeavors to “become one with the one”; i.e., the cosmic whole.

In addition to modifying the symbolism of the Eucharist in the Christian tradition, Serres often develops sensual metaphors centered around nudity and copulation to explain what a more perfect union with the universe would encompass. Serresian spirituality is reminiscent of the eastern and autochthonous ideal of “fusion” (Grieves 10). Interpreting the post-impressionistic nude artwork of Pierre Bonnard as an attempt to “fuse” with the remainder of the planet, he theorizes:

Otez les feuilles, ôtez le peignoir: toucherez-vous la peau de la femme brune ou la toile du tableau [...] Bonnard se jette, nu, dans la piscine du Jardin, au milieu du bain de monde [...] se lancer nu dans l’océan du monde [...] l’impressionnisme en vient à son vrai sens d’origine, au contact.³⁸ (*Les cinq sens* 27-35)

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Serres is even more provocative with his usage of erotic metaphors in his essay *Biogée*, in which he urges the reader to engage in coitus with the earth: “Ne jamais cesser de faire l’amour à Garonne [...] chambre de noces, lit conjugal, femme bien aimée, canal de naissance [...] ventre d’où je fus chassé quand je devins errant solitaire sur la Terre. Mais ma chair garde ses eaux mères”³⁹ (*Biogée* 28-29). Coming from a long line of bargemen who grew up dredging the Garonne river in Southwestern France before attending the naval academy and switching to philosophy for his graduate studies, Serres the philosopher-sailor takes advantage of these erotically charged descriptions to present an alternative philosophical and spiritual vision for humanity in a time period characterized by disconnection. This spiritual inebriation and sensualist zest for life recall the cosmic matrimony that Albert Camus depicts in his lyrical collection of essays, *Noces (Nuptials)*. The symbolic marriage between humanity and the rest of the planet is a spiritual quest that reconnects us to the cosmic whole from which we have progressively become detached.

It may initially sound strange to discuss Tessonian spirituality because he has articulated his “avowed agnosticism” in several interviews and other epitexts (Koo 12). Nevertheless, Tesson’s evocation of the metaphor of fusion brings to mind the cosmic union experienced by the Serresian narrator through his senses. Without eroticizing the earth, or suggesting that we should have sexual relations with it, Tesson also recognizes the “essence divine”⁴⁰ (*Petit traité* 24) of the larger entity with which he is communing. Tesson’s legendary walks are like pilgrimages during which he “touchais [touchait] à l’extase cosmique”⁴¹ (*Petit traité* 24; my insertion). Adopting the pantheistic worldview, Tesson asks, “Comment se fatiguerait-on des échos païens soulevés sous les nefes tropicales par le cantique permanent de la sève et du sang?”⁴²

(*Petit traité* 35). In a conversation with Jean-Marc Porte, Tesson even more explicitly reveals the pantheistic ethos that drives him to refine his sensorial faculties through elemental contact with the cosmos to the point of exhaustion. Given that “tout est connecté à un absolu, un tout plus grand”⁴³ (Porte 69), Tesson’s somatic encounters with the universe are emblematic of an effort to “fuse” with the divine, material particles to which we are linked as planetary beings.

Jean-Xavier Ridon notes that other travel writers representing different literary traditions and time periods often share the same kind of pantheistic affinities. The heart of the concept of fusion is the “union entre esprit et corps en relation avec la nature [qui] produit ces moments d’osmose par lesquels les voyageurs ont l’impression d’être en communion directe avec le cosmos”⁴⁴ (Ridon 24; my insertion). Despite the spiritual value of this metaphorical matrimony with a larger whole, which he insists is more crucial than ever for overcoming the cosmic estrangement that concretizes the postmodern condition, Tesson is not a utopian thinker. The final lines of *Petit traité sur l’immensité du monde* demonstrate that he understands the limitations of the spiritual fusion that he poetically describes. Specifically, he realizes that a perfect union with the biosphere, or the complete removal of all of the impediments preventing us from tasting, touching, feeling, hearing, and seeing unfiltered material realities, is not possible until after we die. Confessing that his final wish is for his body to be returned directly to the earth in order to realize this cosmic matrimony more fully, Tesson proclaims:

Ma dernière volonté sera d’être enterré sous un arbre que mon corps contribuera à nourrir. Ce sera ma manière de m’absoudre. J’aurai assez dévoré de viande pour donner la mienne, en juste retour, à des asticots [...] L’arbre poussera auprès de ma dernière cabane. Mon corps alimentera la sève qui pulsera dans le tronc.⁴⁵ (*Petit traité* 167)

Whereas many people are mortified by the idea of worms and maggots devouring our bodies as part of the decomposition process for those who choose to be buried, Tesson embraces this future event that will ensure his total reintegration into the cosmic whole. All dark humour aside, this passage should be taken seriously as a reflection of a coherent biocentric view of life and conception of the Divine.

CURBING OUR “PARASITIC” IMPULSES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Even if the “parasitic chain” to which Tesson alludes cannot be avoided altogether on a planet that forces us to kill other living entities for the sake of sustenance on a regular basis, both writers staunchly maintain that we urgently need to curb our destructive impulses before it is too late. When we reattune ourselves to the cosmos through somatic channels, we can no longer turn away from the unsustainable, ecological degradation that epitomizes postmodern life. If we dare to look at the havoc

that we are continually wreaking in the globalized, urbanized world, we see “le visage douloureux de la beauté mutilée”⁴⁶ (Serres, *Le contrat naturel* 46) all around us in the Anthropocene-Technocene. Serres’s multifaceted metaphor of the parasite acknowledges the violence that we must inflict upon the world for the sake of survival, but this concept also reminds us what happens when a parasite devours its host entirely. Serres hypothesizes that “parasitism is just a fact of-symbiotic-life” (O’Keeffe 10), but the key to averting the impending anthropogenic *ecocide* is to (re)discover “a modality that will not turn deadly” (Yates 205). In other words, Serres implores us to conceive and implement a way of life that does not obliterate the only planet that appears to be suitable for life as we know it. He promotes the idea of *responsible parasitism*, for “if the parasite eats too much, he’ll kill his host, and it’ll die by the same token” (Mortley 57). Offering a grim assessment of the visible effects of climate change and operationally defining his notion of what could also be termed *ethical parasitism*, Serres bemoans, “Le parasite-notre statut actuel-condamne à mort celui qu’il pille et qu’il habite sans prendre conscience qu’à terme il se condamne lui-même à disparaître. Le parasite prend tout et ne donne rien”⁴⁷ (*Le contrat naturel* 67).

Serres’s denunciation of our myopic, parasitic rapport with the hand that feeds us is inseparable from his (re)appropriation of the common expression “world war.” In *Le contrat naturel* and subsequent works like *La guerre mondiale*, *Biogée*, and *Musique*, he strongly decries the suffering induced by the two conflicts that we typically refer to as world wars while simultaneously contending that the deadliest *guerre mondiale* is the “objective war’ against nature” (Krell 4) that we have unleashed upon the cosmos as the most lethal parasite of all. Serres’s (re)conceptualization of the term “world war” denounces “La violence que j’appelle, justement, la guerre mondiale, la seule digne de porter ce nom, celle que l’humanité, depuis son émergence, livre contre le Monde”⁴⁸ (*La guerre mondiale* 21). Serres further clarifies in *Le contrat naturel*:

Or nous voici en face d’un problème causé par une civilisation en place depuis maintenant plus d’un siècle [...] Monopolisé par la science et l’ensemble des techniques associées au droit de propriété, la raison humaine a vaincu la nature extérieure, dans un combat qui dure depuis la préhistoire, mais qui s’accéléra de façon sévère à la révolution industrielle. (55; 63)⁴⁹

Serres condemns the pervasive misuse of science that has allowed us to transform the universe as never before, starting with the industrial revolution. For him, the problem with the increasing sophistication of our inventions is that they have yet to be accompanied by a type of ethical reflection that would protect the sanctity of our host by ensuring that sustainable limits to our unfettered “development” and “progress” are in place. Without the proper checks and balances in the shape of a natural contract or peace treaty, there will be no end in sight to the war that will seal the fate of all sentient beings, including *Homo sapiens*.

Tesson also articulates his palpable anxiety about climate change in *Petit traité sur l’immensité du monde* and all throughout his environmentally engaged *œuvre*. Similarly to Serres, Tesson harshly criticizes our current relationship with the uni-

verse as a kind of irresponsible parasitism that has reached its pinnacle in the era of rapid industrialization:

Tesson's anti-humanistic stance is essentially driven by a sense of urgency in the face of an imminent ecological crisis and the belief that humans are the most harmful creatures on earth and nature's greatest threat [...] Tesson expresses his concerns about environmental degradation, the widespread disruption of ecosystems, and the irrevocable exhaustion of natural resources. (Koo 15)

366 Wondering if hominescent humans truly are the greatest parasite of all in the Serresian sense, Tesson speculates whether "l'homme est un loup plus dangereux que l'ours"⁵⁰ (*Petit traité* 157). On a less metaphorical level, Tesson highlights the quotidian disappearance of several species whose habitat has been irrevocably destroyed by humans as an overt declaration of war against the planet. In a passage that recalls the scientific theory of the "sixth mass extinction" (Wagler 78) connected to human activities in addition to Serres's concept of the *guerre mondiale*, Tesson affirms, "Or trois espèces animales ou végétales disparaissent chaque jour et dans cent ans ce seront mille deux cents oiseaux qui seront perdus"⁵¹ (*Petit traité* 41). Tesson's apocalyptic, dystopian vision draws its strength from the dire warnings issued by the scientific community.

Even in some of the most geographically isolated areas of the world, where Tesson prefers to commune with the biosphere through his senses, there is no escape from the impact of climate change. He lauds the biocentric resistance of those who "choisissent de tourner le dos à la marche du monde moderne"⁵² (*Petit traité* 153-154) and who "épousent la beauté éternelle"⁵³ (*Petit traité* 154) of the universe far away from urban megapolises in the countryside. Nonetheless, he is painfully aware that "the fragile beauty of this rural landscape is increasingly threatened and subject to a slow but steady degradation brought by modernity" (Koo 16). He implies that, due to our short-sighted parasitism, the beginning of the end is unfolding before our eyes. Even in Indigenous civilizations that have preserved their ancestral lifestyles, the devastating ripple effects of the environmental crisis are apparent. The record high temperature of "38 degrees Celsius (100.4 Fahrenheit)" (Neuman) recorded in June 2020 in the remote village of Verkhoiansk is a disquieting case in point. As the average annual global temperature steadily rises all across the planet, all of the human and other-than-human inhabitants of the earth are paying the price of the Serresian world war launched against the biosphere. Given that it is becoming increasingly more difficult to distance oneself from "la révolution industrielle, sa laideur, sa violence"⁵⁴ (*Petit traité* 53), Tesson ponders how much longer it will be possible to embark upon the epistemological, sensualist, and spiritual quest that he valorizes in the coming years. If we accept his premise that our understanding of the world and our sense of Self are relational, climate change is both an existential and spiritual crisis.

CONCLUSION

Serres and Tesson expose the shaky edifice of dominant anthropocentric thought paradigms by proposing an alternative reading of the world predicated upon a rehabilitation of our five senses. According to Serres the unconventional philosopher and Tesson the world traveller-adventurer, it is through somatic encounters with the universe that we can sharpen our dulled sensorial faculties that are essential epistemological and spiritual pathways. For *hominescent* humanity in search of a greater comprehension of themselves and the earth, to which all species, including *Homo sapiens*, are connected, the first step is to rediscover our cosmic roots through a reinvigoration of our sensory organs. Serres and Tesson posit that a heightened state of ecological awareness is triggered once our senses have been restored to their original vitality through direct contact with other material entities. They further maintain that this environmental consciousness, which has been obfuscated by centuries of misleading anthropocentric logic in Western society, is paramount to stemming the tide of the ecological crisis that is upon us. When we reestablish a meaningful bond with the cosmic whole, which is usually out of sight and out of mind in our alienated culture hidden behind walls or screens, Serres and Tesson argue that it is harder to turn a blind eye to our systematic destruction in the Anthropocene-Technocene. Even if the perilous, sensorial journey lived and recounted by Tesson is hardly a realistic solution to the problem of exo-Darwinian evolution for many readers, his main point is cogent. Perhaps, Serres's epitextual advice that "Et si vous avez perdu le corps [...] il faut marcher deux heures par jour"⁵⁵ (Zimmerman) could be a more viable path for healing the aforementioned ecological disconnect in a globalized, urbanized landscape. Whereas it may not be possible or desirable for average city dwellers to risk their lives travelling by "fair means," anyone can make a concerted effort to spend a few minutes smelling the roses in our flower beds. This simple philosophical and spiritual exercise could open up a window to ourselves and the biosphere, enabling global society to write a different chapter to the doomsday scenario that appears to be on the horizon.

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NOTES

1. "Ass in the saddle, thoughts in the sky." All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
2. "Reading of the world."
3. "Establish a more direct rapport with nature."
4. "Monk-beggars, troubadours, travellers, *hobos*, or beatniks."
5. "Betrayed the principles of *fair means*."
6. "Motorized vagabondage."

7. "There does not exist, at least for the moment, a philosophy of this world for this world."
8. "philosophy forgets the house that it lives in [...] this house of sensation. [...] what if philosophy were to come to us through the senses?"
9. "Skins without doors or windows, chain mail, armour, what do you feel?"
10. "Retracing my steps on this sloping path. I am evoking a still poetic dream of another epistemology. Can I reconstruct knowledge starting from this understanding? How does the ear know things? And how does our skin, pulsating from others and the world, know things as well?"
11. This point will be further addressed in a later section of this article in the context of the doctrine of philosophical materialism.
12. "Come, the last child of man capable of listening and seeing, come feel and touch, you will learn rather soon the science [of knowledge], rest assured that you will learn."
13. "We are losing our senses."
14. "Our organs sometimes empty themselves of their forms and functions to transfer them to the outside [...] These externalized apparatuses produce [...] a history which I call exo-Darwinian evolution."
15. "I am walking on a soil whose slope is rising softly. At a certain point. I stop and 'place my hands on it': the real mountain begins, I am climbing. While my body was bent over, did I return to the state of a quadruped? Almost: my body has been transformed [...] I remember what we were [...] How could we have forgotten this rudimentary and animal-like relationship with the world?"
16. "In short, the last few decades, a new body was born. More than a historical development, this break touches anthropology, the evolution of the *hominian*, the global process of *hominization* [...] this new body reconstructs aesthetics, morality, and politics, violence and cognition, even greater still our *être-au-monde*."
16. "The ocean spray of the journey vivifies his soul and reinvigorates his body."
17. "Become a little like a mammal again."
18. "Relearning of the body."
19. "A physical relationship with the world."
20. "In the forest of the last resort, on the other hand, we enter with a knock as much as we do with our books without isolating ourselves from the song of nature, without cutting the roots that connect our flesh to the humus of the world. Without renouncing the animality that is the greatness of man."
21. "Body that never wants to rest [that ...] behaves like a child who is never satiated and needs to be taken care of all the time."
22. "Sedentary and lazy destinations in cities."
23. "I like to travel feverishly, with my senses on alert, sharpened so as not to miss the slightest bit of the spectacle of the world."
24. "Feet covered in leeches, lost in the mud of a swamp."
25. "Small steps."
26. "Slow down the race of hours."
27. "We remain on the earth, with our two feet [...] on the ground."
28. "But who am I, I who sees? And these living beings, plants or animals, mushrooms and algae, single-celled that live in me and that I do not see? Fountains of time, streaming among others [...] As for

me, I only count like any other step of the stairs.”

29. “The intimate nature of life, of matter.”
30. “In spite of how high he has risen in the saddle, every Matterhorn knows all too well that he is made up of the same dust as a molehill. We all come from the same earth, from the same mother, from the same universal matter.”
31. “Whether we like it or not, it’s matter that gives the orders: the best government in the world can only give what it has. It sometimes happens that it cannot contain water pockets. And, the rainy season can come late.”
32. “I am going to finally know if I have a life on the inside.”
33. “Give meaning again.”
34. “I had been taught that man was at the top of the pyramid of life. But the edifice has collapsed and I now mistrust it like clear water that the eyes believe is good and the throat discovers dirty. I unbolted Man from my inner pedestal the way Lenin was thrown to the base of the marble pedestals in the socialist Republics in the fall of 91.”
35. “Mother of all things.”
36. “If God exists, he is life, wind, fire ... the essence of life [...] the beginning [...] the excellence and the love of life.”
37. “Take away the leaves, take off the bathrobe, touch the skin of the brown woman or the canvas of the painting [...] Bonnard threw himself naked into the pool of the garden, in the middle of the bath of the world [...] launching ourselves naked into the ocean of the world [...] impressionism returns to its true sense of origin, to contact.”
38. “Don’t ever stop making love to Garonne and being born from it, emerging from it, flowing from my maternal abode [...] conjugal bedroom, conjugal bed, beloved woman, birth canal [...] belly from which I was driven out when I became a solitary nomad on this Earth. But my flesh has retained these motherly waters.”
39. “Divine essence.”
40. “Touches [this] cosmic ecstasy.”
41. “How could we get tired of the pagan echoes raised under the tropical vessels by the permanent hymn of sap and blood?”
42. “Everything is connected to an absolute, a larger thing.”
43. “Union between mind and body in relation with nature [that] produces these moments of osmosis through which travellers have the impression of being in direct communion with the cosmos.”
44. “My last wish will be to be buried under a tree that my body will help to nourish. This will be my way of absolving myself. I will have devoured enough meat to give mine, in return, to maggots [...] A tree will grow near my last cabin. My body will feed the sap that will pulsate in the trunk.”
45. “the painful face of mutilated beauty.”
46. “The parasite—our actual status—condemns that which he pillages and he lives without realizing that in turn he is condemning himself to disappear. The parasite takes everything and gives nothing.”
47. “The violence that I correctly call the world war, the only one worthy of this name, that which humanity since its emergence, has been waging against the World, and that we urgently need to address.”
48. “Here we are facing a problem caused by a civilization in place for now more than a century [...]

Monopolized by science and by the totality of the technological advances associated with property rights, human reason defeated external nature in a struggle that has been taking place since prehistory, but which was severely accelerated by the industrial revolution.”

49. “Man is a more dangerous wolf than a bear.”
50. “now three animal or plant species disappear every day and in a hundred years it will be two hundred birds that will be lost.”
51. “Choose to turn their back on the march of the modern world.”
52. “Marry the eternal beauty.”
53. “The industrial revolution, its ugliness, its violence.”
54. “If you have lost your body [...] you need to walk two hours a day.”

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